

Column

When I was a boy, we would go to the state fair. In addition to rides and exhibits, there were barns with livestock. My favourite animals were the pigs and sheep – pigs because of their pink skin and curly tails, sheep because you could sink your hands into their wool.

You find the latter – sheep – not only in agriculture shows but in religious art and literature. Depictions of Jesus and sheep are familiar to most. In the area of literature, the 23rd Psalm immediately comes to mind with its opening words: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

I once heard an old Baptist preacher say that if he had only one text to preach from, it would be the 23rd Psalm. I can understand why he would make such a statement. A shepherd’s care of his sheep is a compelling and winsome way of thinking of God’s care of us human beings. And, yes, we human beings are often like those sheep, prone to wander and standing in need of rescue. One could indeed get many sermons from Psalm 23.

But, we dare not wax too sentimental about the image of shepherd and sheep. After all, when Jesus made this imagery His own in John 10, when He said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” it almost got Him killed. His words were anything but comforting. They were explosive. How so?

Well, because He was making what could only be viewed as a God claim. Those who heard Him would have known He was drawing from a scene in Ezekiel 34.

Here, God is heard soliloquizing, complaining about the shepherds of Israel (i.e., kings of Israel). He says they have been bad shepherds inasmuch as they have cared for themselves and not the sheep (i.e., the people). More than that, God reveals a plan of action. He says: “Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out” (Ezekiel 34:11).

And so, when Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd” He is linking Himself to the God of the Hebrew scriptures and almost provokes a riot in the process. We are told those who heard Him “took up stones” (John 10:34).

What must our take be on this? It is this. At the sight of Jesus with a lamb, we must get more than a flutter of warm feelings. Rather, with Thomas in the Upper Room (John 20:28), we must acclaim Him our “Lord and our God”.

More than that, His work of caring for the sheep of God’s pasture has fallen on us. Following His resurrection, Jesus said to Peter: “Feed my sheep.” His words are for all those who will come after, those in the ordained ministry, yes, but also all the baptized. We all have a part to play in our Lord’s great work. So, let’s grab our feeding cans and get busy!

O MERCIFUL God, who hast made all men, and hatest nothing that thou hast made, nor desirest the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live; Have mercy upon all who know thee not as thou art revealed in the Gospel of thy Son. Take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of thy Word; and so fetch them home, blessed Lord, to thy fold, that they may be made one flock under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

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